How climate change skeptical leaders may “Trump” supporters’ pro-environmental engagement

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Background

The scientific consensus is that anthropogenic climate change is real and needs to be addressed urgently[1,2]. Countries all over the world have committed to climate change mitigation (e.g., the Paris Climate Agreement[3]). Yet, recent elections in various countries saw climate skeptics rise to prominence[4].

We aim to explore how climate change engagement may be impacted when climate skeptical leaders are elected and implement policies that contribute to climate change.

Method

Design: questionnaires at 3 time points; independent samples

Timing:

- **T1:** 1 day before US presidential election (N=423)
- **T2:** 20 days after Trump's inauguration (N=427)
- **T3:** 100 days after Trump's inauguration (N=432)

Sample: US population recruited via MTURK

Measures: indicators of climate change engagement and support for presidential candidates

- **Beliefs:** 'To what extent do you think the world's climate is changing?' (1 = Definitely not, 7 = Definitely); 'To what extent do you think that climate change is caused by human activity? (e.g., CO2 emissions, burning of fossil fuels)' (1 = Not at all, 7 = Completely)
- **Perceived risk:** 'How bad or good do you think the potential impact of climate change will be on people across the world?' (1 = Very bad, 7 = Very good; *R*)
- **Emotional engagement:** e.g., 'I would feel guilty if I did not act in an environmentally-friendly manner,' (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)
- **Behavioral intentions:** 'To what extent are you willing to save energy for the sake of reducing climate change?' (1 = Not at all, 7 = Completely)
- **Policy preferences:** 'Do you think the United States should abide by the provisions of the Paris Climate Agreement?' (1 = Definitely not, 7 = Definitely)
- **Support for major party candidates:** two single items, 'What is your impression of [Donald Trump / Hillary Clinton]?' (1 = Very negative, 7 = Very positive). Support for [Trump/Clinton] operationalized as above midpoint (> 4); 'Neither' group operationalized as midpoint or below (<= 4) for both candidates

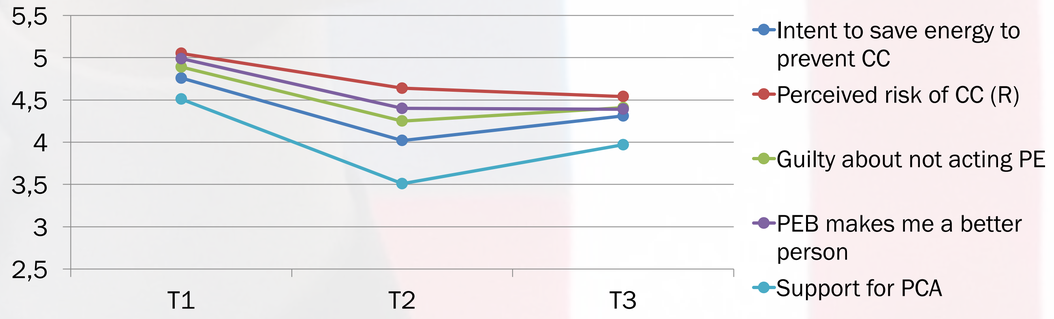
N's of support for the presidential candidates, split by wave

	T1		T2		T3	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Trump	108	24%	116	27%	110	25%
Clinton	132	29%	150	34%	141	32%
Neither	183	41%	161	37%	181	41%

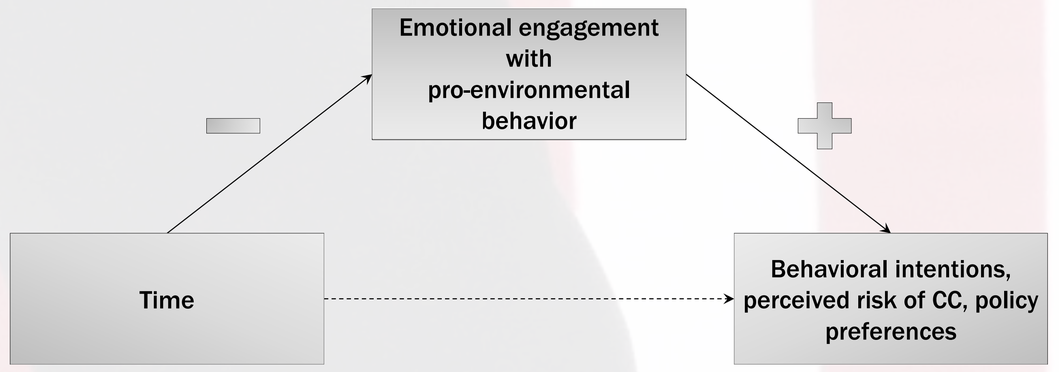
Results

Trump supporters' behavioral intentions, perceived risks, emotional engagement, and policy preferences lower than prior to presidential election (ps < .05). Beliefs in climate change stable (ps > .13).

Climate change engagement over time



Emotional engagement with pro-environmental behavior mediates[5] the relations between time and behavioral intentions, perceived risk of climate change, and policy preferences among Trump supporters.



	Time → Feelings			Feelings → Outcome			Indirect effects			
	B	se	*p*	B	se	*p*	B	se	boot LCI	boot UCI
Behavioral intentions	**-0.40**	0.14	0.004	**0.76**	0.06	<0.001	**-0.30**	0.10	-0.52	-0.11
Perceived risk of CC	**-0.41**	0.13	0.002	**0.24**	0.05	<0.001	**-0.10**	0.04	-0.18	-0.04
Policy preferences	**-0.49**	0.16	0.002	**0.64**	0.07	<0.001	**-0.31**	0.10	-0.53	-0.12

Clinton supporters showed no changes over time.

People who support neither Trump nor Clinton showed a significant increase in anthropogenic climate change beliefs, and similar trends toward increased climate change engagement for other target measures, but ns.

Anthropogenic climate change belief over time

Discussion

Trump supporters showed a decrease in their climate change engagement over time. These changes were partially explained by their reduced emotional engagement with pro-environmental behavior. This is consistent with multiple social psychological theories, like heuristic-based decision-making[6], evaluating risks as feelings[7,8], and the Elaboration Likelihood Model[9]. Our findings suggest that climate skeptical leaders may impact supporters' engagement with climate change by changing their feelings about pro-environmental behaviors.

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